
Lone Hill, Dana. *Pointing with Lips: A Week in the Life of a Rez Chick*. Greenfield: Blue Hand Books, 2014. ISBN: 978-1-4959-4529-8. 326 pp.

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Humor. There is much one can say about this important first novel by Dana Lone Hill, *Pointing with Lips: A Week in the Life of a Rez Chick*, but humor is at the forefront of her work. On nearly every page there is something to make the reader smile, chuckle, or tear up with laughter. To be sure there are serious issues dealt with in the novel, but humor sustains the reader through the work, as humor sustained the author growing up on Pine Ridge Indian Reservation, the setting for *Pointing with Lips*. In *Custer Died for Your Sins*, Vine Deloria, Jr. argues, “One of the best ways to understand a people is to know what makes them laugh. Laughter encompasses the limits of the soul. In humor life is redefined and accepted. Irony and satire provide much keener insights into a group’s collective psyche and values than do years of research” (140). Lone Hill uses laughter as a setting for growing up Oglala Lakota on Pine Ridge. In order to understand what encompasses being a “rez chick,” the reader must understand the importance of humor in the Lakota Nation. Likewise, one must know Lakota culture to understand the clear portrait of what it means to be a member of contemporary Lakota reservation life as portrayed in *Pointing with Lips*.

In a recent interview I conducted with Lone Hill, I asked her about the humor in the novel. She responded, “My grandmother Dod was the funniest woman I know... my uncles, my brothers, my father, so many people in my life and people I grew up with have the best sense of humor. I believe it is something we have always had and always will—it gets us through life. Especially when you grow up in poverty, I mean you can’t always cry.” For Sincere Strongheart, known primarily as “Sis,” the protagonist and narrator of *Pointing with Lips*, survival is her daily existence. Sis, single mother of three children by two different men, lives and works a dead end job at the Great Sioux Shopping Center on Pine Ridge. Before the reader is ten pages into the novel, Sis explains her entire family structure. I was struck with the oddity of a narrator clearly laying out a family tree so quickly in the story, until I remembered the importance of Lakota kinship relationships. Lone Hill discussed the emphasis on kinship in the novel: “I try to emphasize [kinship] so much because we keep our families close, and I think we do it because we lose so much and lost so much. I introduced her whole family first, even those absent in the book, because it is our reality.” Reality is what comes across in her delightfully drawn words, Lakota reality. Sis observes, “If an Indian woman’s worth is finding out a way you’re related to her then the women in my family are priceless” (146). *Wolakota oyna skanpo*, can be loosely translated, “to do this is in the Lakota way.” It became readily clear to me that Lone Hill was writing a novel *wolakota oyna skanpo*, or what I call “writing Lakota.” In *Pointing with Lips*, Lone Hill translates modern reservation life through the lens of Lakota customs, traditions, and lifeways.

First words of a novel have always been important to me, a map to guide the reader through the novel. Sis begins her story: “The pow wow grounds on my reservation are always dusty. Actually, the whole village of Pine Ridge, South Dakota is dusty.” To those familiar with Lakota creation histories, the little brother of the Four Winds, the Four Directions, *Yumnimni* (*Yum*), the “little whirlwind or dust devil,” can be seen in these opening lines. Lone Hill acknowledged that

she is familiar with Lakota origin stories, and at least “subconsciously,” she references, at the very least, the lessons handed down to her through these stories. Throughout the text I kept finding characteristics that Yum and Sis share. For amusement they will risk anything, they are governed by chance and favor, and they cannot protect others or even themselves until they find themselves. Sis protects her family, particularly her *winkte* cousin and best friend Boogie and her children, only to realize that she cannot until she confronts her own burden, alcohol.

Critics will surely have much to say about another comedic take on the “drunken reservation Indian,” but I am reminded of what Muskogee poet Joy Harjo said in an interview with Laura Coltelli; “Alcoholism is an epidemic in native people, and I write about it. I was criticized for bringing it up, because some people want to present a certain image of themselves. But again, it comes back to what I was saying: part of the process of healing is to address what is evil” (140). Lone Hill is writing her reality:

When I wrote *Pointing with Lips*, I was incarcerated, awaiting sentencing. My future was up in the air and I had no idea how long I was going away. All I knew was I was so absolutely lonesome for my kids, my family... my home, my land... I was hoping, in a way, I can show people on the rez, reckless behavior will never let you advance; you have to do it yourself. I was tired of the “I am a victim” society I grew up in, and I wanted to show we are survivors.

The seven days Sis narrates cover drunken and drugged out mothers who do not take care of their children, and she translates the extremely horrific consequences of those actions through her own family’s history, but there is hope too, as when she believes, “If someone wants to quit drinking it has to come from within them self” (181). The connection to Yum is readily apparent and it is in this connection to Lakota tradition and customs where Lone Hill demonstrates a means for survival.

The connection to Lakota humor and Landscape are also a means of survivance. Sis describes a drunken scene in a corn field following a night out in a border town:

We are throwing the cans in some farmer’s field, I am sure in the morning some fat farmer, riding his tractor will be raging and shaking his fist at the Lord in the sky, “These damn drunken Injuns!”

Fuck him I think, as I throw a half full can into his field. This is our land!”

Whoa, now I know I am shit faced. I hate littering. I really do, not to the point where I am the fake Indian letting a tear roll down my cheek. But I do care to the point where I do give a hoot to not pollute. (65-66)

Pointing with Lips is filled with wonderful inside jokes about PSA Indians, recycling owls, commod cheese, *wateca*, and pointing with lips, but there are also Lakota lessons being passed along in the picturesque descriptions of the Black Hills, Badlands, and even the Pine Ridge Reservation. In our interview, Lone Hill told me, “People see our reservations and they see poverty, broken down communities and families. What they do not see is the beauty I see and respect. Landscapes tell a story, they tell [us] we need to continue with educating the next

generation that we belong to this land and we need to care for the land that feeds us, shelters us, gives us water.” The stories are passed down from generation to generation in the novel and in Lone Hill’s life, “I think my biggest influences for storytelling were two of my grandfathers. I was never presented them in written form, always oral and I try to remember them and tell them to my children. It is a way of keeping our history... alive.” The story Lone Hill passes down and the stories Sis narrates are Lakota histories recorded for survivance.

There are a number of critics who have lamented Sis’s “white boyfriend” Mason Thomas, “Mase,” riding to the rescue of Sis at the end of the novel. I asked Lone Hill what she thought of this characterization: “I don’t think Mase saved her at all, I think it was the first time in her life she felt appreciated by a man. I think Sis has to save herself; however, much support from Mase and mainly her family will get her there.” If the text is read in a Lakota way, lessons from origin histories, like the tales of Yum, and kinship relationships, can guide the reader to better understand how Sis has to save herself, with the help of her family and friends, including Mase.

While *Pointing with Lips* can be seen as just another comedic “rez chick” novel, (though Lone Hill acknowledges she labels it as such) it is really much more when read through a Lakota lens. Writing Lakota is a challenging task. To fill a novel full of traditional Lakota kinship relationships, stories, language, landscapes, and humor is demanding, but to do so *and* portray real contemporary reservation life, the good, the bad, ugly and sad, in a thoughtful, honest, and humorous portrayal is what makes writing Lakota and Dana Lone Hill’s *Pointing with Lips* uniquely wonderful.

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Works Cited

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